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AUTHOR	Lidman, Russell M.; Weeks, Gregory C.
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ABSTRACT

The Washington State welfare reform program WorkFirst is designed to move individuals from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) into the workforce. A critical question facing the program is how to assist participants in sustaining and advancing their employment. Three studies of those who exited the program measured multiple outcomes against targets. Worker occupations were found to be low-skill, low-wage jobs with limited advancement opportunities. The average monthly household income for participants who worked all year was much higher than for those who did not work. Two thirds of those who exited from WorkFirst remained out, while one-third returned to assistance within one year. Only half of those receiving a WorkFirst benefit are moved into a job search workshop. A program designed to minimize impact on the unemployment insurance system was unsuccessful. A measure of caseload reduction has shown that WorkFirst is becoming less effective over time in maintaining families' economic independence. Analysis showed that a better approach is to emphasize retention or to assist with rapid job transitions. The researchers concluded that also needed are the following: (1) a greater emphasis on moving WorkFirst participants through the program, off the program, and into follow-on support such as the Job Success Coach Initiative; and (2) services specifically designed for returners. (SLR)

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Improving Outcomes in Washington's WorkFirst Program: Are Post-Employment Services the Answer?

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Russell M. Lidman
Assistant Commissioner for Policy
and
Gregory C. Weeks
Deputy Assistant Commissioner,
Labor Market and Economic Analysis
Washington State Employment Security Department

Presented to
US Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration
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Improving Outcomes in Washington's WorkFirst Program: Are Post-Employment Services the Answer?

Introduction

Performance measures and policy research are integral to Washington's WorkFirst program. We have learned that WorkFirst participants are working more and earning more, and they are exiting assistance more quickly than was the case under AFDC. We are learning the effectiveness of the various program elements, and how the offices throughout the state are doing. Regular program information and focused research have alerted us to program shortcomings and have guided us in developing remedies.

We emphasize the word 'guided.' Information contributes to but is not a substitute for management decision making. WorkFirst is a complicated program, operating in scores of offices, with numerous contractors and with dozens of distinct program elements or options. (See Figure 4.) In principle and in time, we will know a great deal about the impacts of these components. However, in practice and in real time, decisions are made on the information available, together with projection, surmise and experience.

One of the critical questions facing the program is how to assist participants in sustaining and advancing in their employment. Our review of the evidence suggests that we should invest in employment-related services and supports. This paper indicates how we arrived at this and some of the elements of this still-evolving strategy.

Context

Washington State's welfare reform has enjoyed high-level political visibility at times over the past four years. WorkFirst was developed in early-1997 in the aftermath of the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. The bill enacting the program represents the interplay between the Republican majority-led chambers of the legislature and the then-recently elected Democratic Governor, Gary Locke. Subsequent to the program's inception, control of the state Senate shifted to the Democrats and the Democrats gained a tie in the state House. Governor Locke convened a sub-cabinet of the directors of the most centrally involved agencies and has been engaged in the program from the start. Llegislative discussion of the program, for the most part, has focused on whether the program's performance measures are appropriate and on how the program has performed according to competing measures.

WorkFirst's statutory framework is supported by principles that have guided the program's development through these first four years. These can be summarized as follows:

- WorkFirst is about personal responsibility, not just about transferring income;
- Entry-level employment should be the first rung on a job ladder, not the first steps on a poverty treadmill;
- Everyone who can work should;
- WorkFirst is for poor working families, not just TANF participants; and
- WorkFirst is a performance-driven program.

These principles are incorporated in measures that guide program policy and management.

Statutes and principles are important. What happens in the field matters as well. WorkFirst has been flexible. Changes have occurred in program emphasis and implementation for a number of reasons.

- After nearly two year's of a work-first emphasis, Governor Locke challenged program leadership to do more to help participants retain employment and progress in their incomes;
- The state's various performance measures and studies have reported what works and what doesn't, and have suggested approaches to remedying program deficiencies;
- Experience in administering the program has corrected some design shortcomings and has led to improved cooperation among the partner agencies; and
- Improved support services for participants, former participants and other low-wage workers have been made possible with funds made avialable from declines in caseload and in the requirements for cash assistance.

Changes in WorkFirst's delivery of services were facilitated in the legislation and in the program's budget framework. Still the program has evolved more than was anticipated at the outset. Solutions to problems have been crafted and implemented in short order. In one notable instance described below, a hoped-for 'fix' turned out to be inadequate, was terminated and has already been replaced. Bureaucracies generally do not move at a pace even approaching that expected of the partner agencies in the state's WorkFirst program. One of the agency leaders of WorkFirst said of the pace of the implementation of the reform, "A month is a year in WorkFirst." The direct and regular involvement of the Governor in monitoring the program produced a level of interest and activity in the agencies beyond what otherwise might have been expected.

Guiding a Complex Program

WorkFirst has been committed to as near real-time information as possible from the outset. This investment in and commitment to information, whether from on-going or one-time participant surveys, field reviews or analysis of administrative data, allows the Governor and program leadership to identify gaps and to continually fine-tune the program. Information about the program is widely shared and program supporters and critics alike have the information to consider the program's successes and shortcomings.[1]

WorkFirst staff produced three studies of program exiters in 1998 and 1999. A longitudinal study, the WorkFirst Study, was developed in order to enable us to track exiters for a longer period and to understand the circumstances of those who remain on the program.[2] When the second phase of the survey is completed later this year, the Study will have a comprehensive three-year picture of WorkFirst participants.

The focus on performance measurement requires clarity about what matters, the translation of that into measures that can be routinely obtained from administrative data, and a system to inform those involved in the program how WorkFirst, overall, and the local offices are succeeding. Governor Locke receives a biweekly performance report on the program. The measures displayed in the report include:

- Number of Adults on TANF entering employment
- Total TANF Caseload

- Percent of Clients Returning to TANF After 12 Months
- Percent of Families Who Are or Were on Welfare With Paid Child Support
- Percent of Clients Remaining Employed After Leaving TANF
- Percent of Clients Leaving Welfare Whose Earnings Increased by 10 Percent After One Year
- Percent of Participants in Community Jobs With Job Placements
- Percent of Enrollees in Welfare-to-Work With Job Placements
- Percent of Participants Completing Pre-employment Training
- Percent of Pre-employment Training Participants With Job Placements

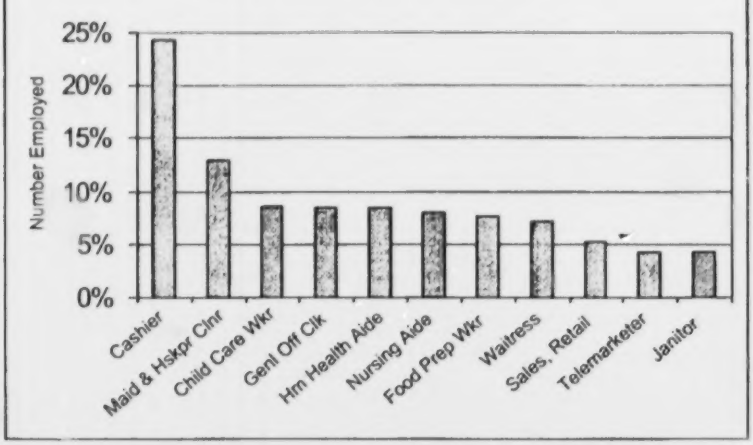
Each of these measures is benchmarked against a target. Directors of the four state agencies involved in the WorkFirst partnership are accountable solely or in tandem for a number of the measures.

On a monthly basis, these measures are provided at the local level for the offices of the Department of Social and Health Services and the Employment Security Department and, at regional levels as well. Offices are ranked on these and on various activity measures, and problem offices are identified and targeted for special assistance.[3]

Some Background: Employment and Incomes of WorkFirst Participants

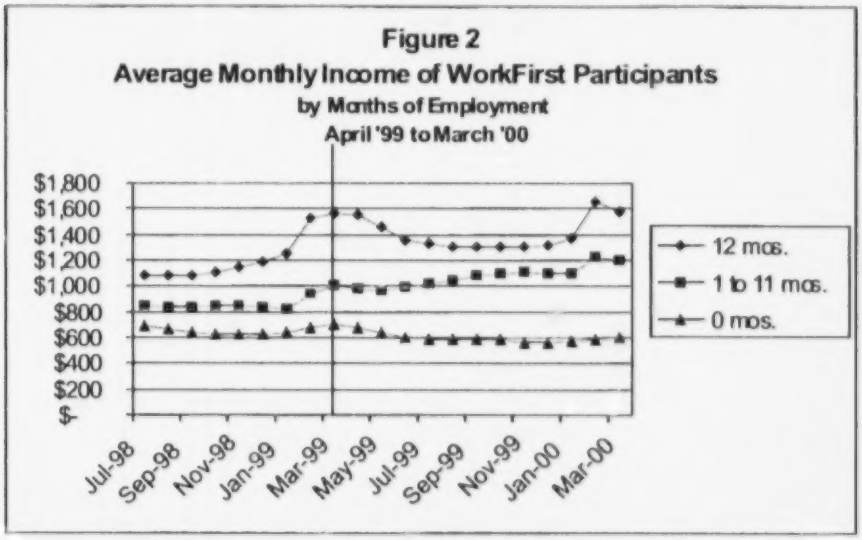
WorkFirst has moved large numbers of participants into employment. Those who are working have substantially higher family incomes do than those who have remained on assistance. The return to assistance of those who exited is a major concern.

Figure 1
Occupations of the WorkFirst Study Sample

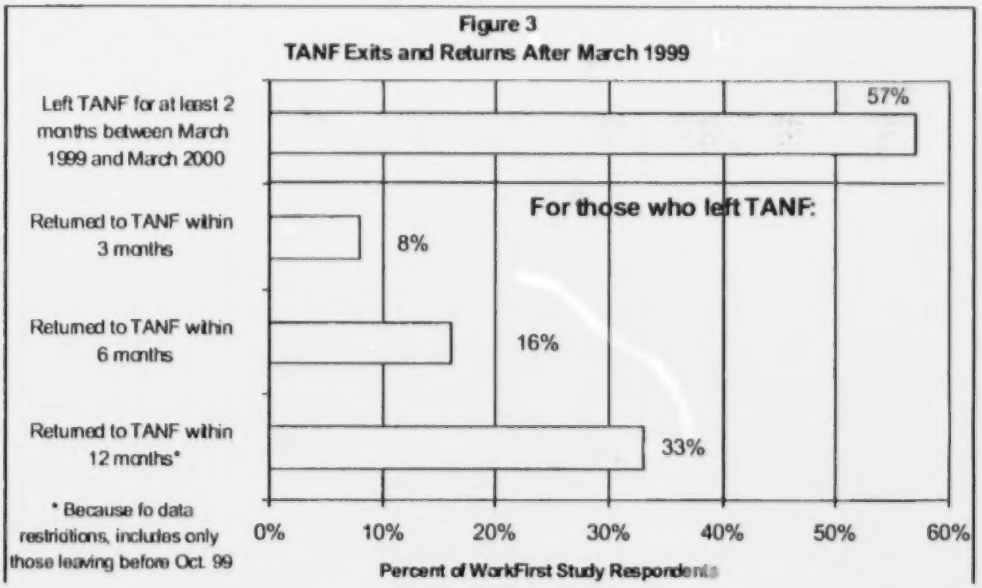


Data presented here are from the WorkFirst Study. The WorkFirst Study is a based on a survey of 3000 participants, supplemented with data from administrative records. Figure 1[4] shows the occupations of WorkFirst Study participants. Many WorkFirst participants work in low-skill occupations offering low wages and limited opportunities for advancement.[5]. The WorkFirst "Employment" report finds, "Average wages for workers have steadily increased from $7.20 in March1999 to $7.80 in June 2000." The relatively low hourly wage rates notwithstanding, WorkFirst participants who work are much better off than those who do not, and those who work more are better off than those who work less.

Figure 2[6] shows the average monthly household income for WorkFirst participants who worked all year, part-year, or did not work during the year. The increases in average family income around March are due to the EITC. Figure 2 shows that the average incomes of families of WorkFirst participants who worked throughout the year were, by February and March 2000, nearly $1000 per month above those of families where the participant did not work at all.

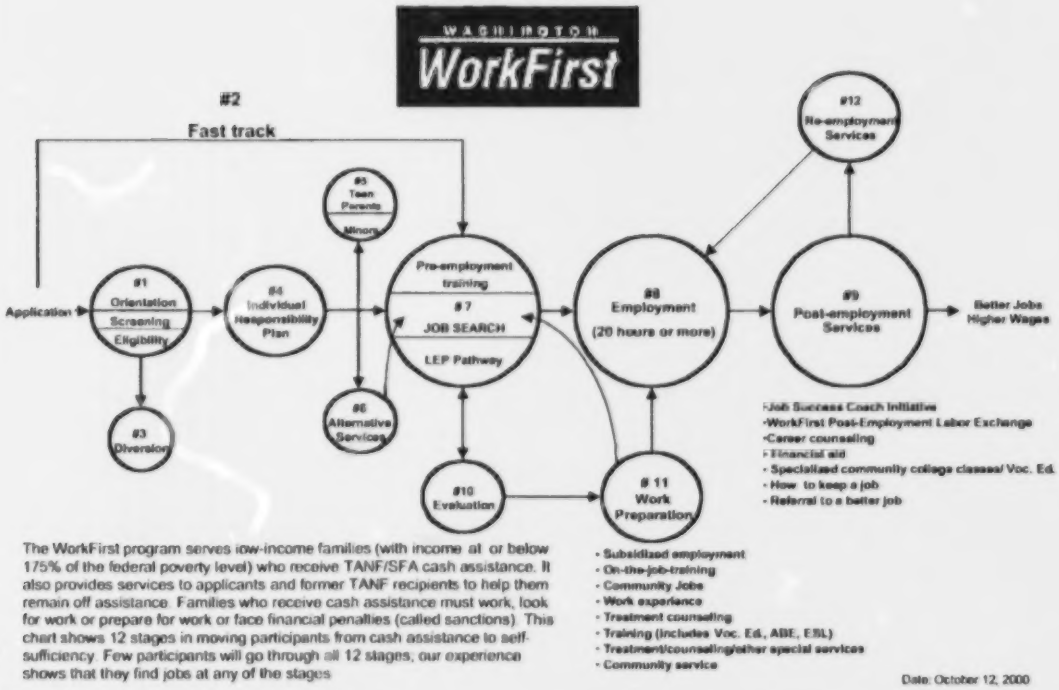


The WorkFirst Study has shown that "Employment increased by more than 10 percentage points over the study period. Employment increased for families who stayed on TANF as well as for families who left TANF". With over half of the sample working, many are able to leave WorkFirst. Figure 3[7] shows the exit rate and the return rates for WorkFirst Study respondents. Two-thirds of those in the sample who exited from WorkFirst were able to remain off while one-third returned to assistance within one year. Despite high rates of employment and of exit, the number that return to welfare after an exit is a serious concern.



The Program Template and Its Limits

Figure 4
Participant Flow


WASHINGTON
WorkFirst
#2
Fast track
#12
Re-employment Services
#5
Teen Parents
Minors
Application
#1
Orientation
Screening
Eligibility
#4
Individual Responsibility Plan
Pre-employment training
#7
JOB SEARCH
LEP Pathway
#8
Employment
(20 hours or more)
#9
Post-employment Services
Better Jobs
Higher Wages
#3
Diversion
#6
Alternative Services
#10
Evaluation
11
Work Preparation
·Job Success Coach Initiative
·WorkFirst Post-Employment Labor Exchange
·Career counseling
·Financial aid
· Specialized community college classes/ Voc. Ed.
· How to keep a job
· Referral to a better job
The WorkFirst program serves low-income families (with income at or below 175% of the federal poverty level) who receive TANF/SFA cash assistance. It also provides services to applicants and former TANF recipients to help them remain off assistance. Families who receive cash assistance must work, look for work or prepare for work or face financial penalties (called sanctions). This chart shows 12 stages in moving participants from cash assistance to self-sufficiency. Few participants will go through all 12 stages; our experience shows that they find jobs at any of the stages
· Subsidized employment
· On-the-job-training
· Community Jobs
· Work experience
· Treatment counseling
· Training (includes Voc. Ed., ABE, ESL)
· Treatment/counseling/other special services
· Community service
Date: October 12, 2000

At the time WorkFirst was designed, it was envisioned that there would be a single service model or template, the representation of which is the flow chart. (See Fig.4.). This chart describes how, within the context of the statute, WorkFirst participants are to move along the path to self-sufficiency and the services available to serve them along the way.

The extent of the departure from the defined template was not anticipated. Data from the WorkFirst Study indicate that only about half of those who receive a WorkFirst benefit get moved along even to the job search workshop.[8] The remaining half found their way onto assistance and, perhaps, even off assistance without having to participate in this core element of the program.

Is this necessarily a shortcoming of the program? In so far as we know, the answer is yes, it is a shortcoming. The WorkFirst Study points out that, controlling for individual circumstances, the Job Search Workshop raises participants' rate of employment by about ten percentage points. (See Figure 5.) Given the high level of impact for such a low-cost program, it should be desirable to have a higher rate of participation in the workshop and subsequent work search activity. Indeed from the onset there have been efforts underway and mechanisms in place to move clients along the way. The problem is these efforts have not been fully successful. This has become the subject of an internal operational review and there is a renewed emphasis to steering participants to job search.

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Figure 5: Estimates of the Impact of WorkFirst Activities on the Percent Employed

Activity	Type of Clients Referred to Activity[a]	Estimates of Change in Percent Employed[b]
Job Search Workshop	Mixed	10% **
Work Experience	Mixed	-3%
Pre Employment Training	More job-ready	13% **
Community Jobs	Less job-ready	4%

** Indicates that estimate is statistically discernable from zero

[a] Results based on multivariate logit analysis of chances for referral to each activity.

[b] Estimates are based on multivariate logit analysis of Employment in the 4th quarter of 1999. The model includes control variables for education, TANF receipt, work experience, health barriers, family structure, region, age, race/ethnicity, adult abuse, teen birth, and parents' welfare receipt.

Re-employ Washington Workers – A False Start

Re-employ Washington Workers was a program element designed to counter the impact on the Unemployment Insurance system of former WorkFirst participants who, after leaving employment, qualify for a UI benefit. About a year after WorkFirst began, we saw a modestly higher utilization of UI among recent former participants than among the workforce at large.[9] WorkFirst leadership, in cooperation with the state's Employment Security Department, designed Re-employ Washington Workers, or RWW, to support the rapid re-employment of the former participants.[10] The program included individual attention, job club participation, computerized labor market information and job search assistance, and bonuses for rapid re-employment. Because services cannot be targeted upon UI claimants solely on the basis of their having participated on public assistance, RWW was a voluntary program. Program leadership sought to make it sufficiently attractive, in terms of the services provided, and remunerative, through the re-employment bonus, to realize a high rate of participation among the target population.

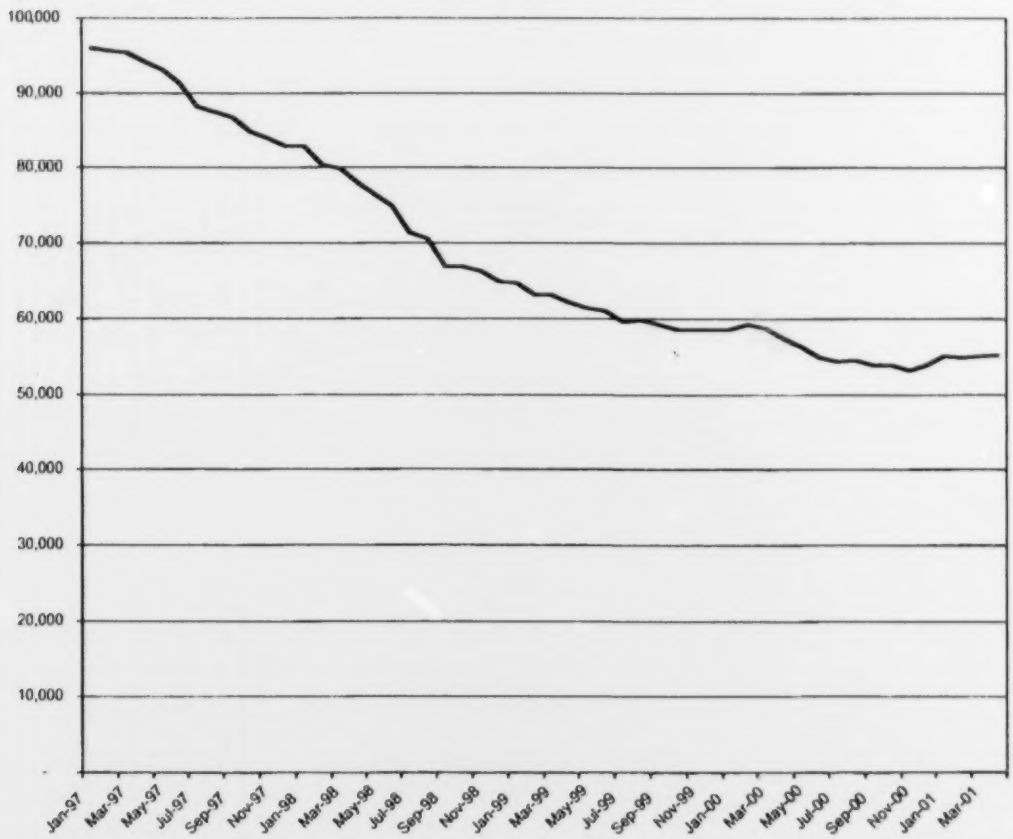
Reviews of the performance measures and the management information over more than a year showed RWW succeeded neither in attracting more than one-fourth of the target population nor in speeding the return to assistance. A number of management and program re-designs were attempted to no discernable effect.

Our analysis was that a program designed around re-employment occurs after the damage is done. A better approach is to emphasize retention or to assist in choreographing a rapid transition from a job to a better job, or from one work activity to another.

The Need for Something New

Caseload reduction is an indication of program success. A program that succeeds in rapidly linking participants to work and in assisting them in sustaining their attachment to employment will demonstrate a decline in the caseload. The caseload of Washington's WorkFirst program declined steadily until mid-2000 but has scarcely declined since. (See Figure 6.) By this key measure, WorkFirst has stalled. Other measures confirm this. One such measure is the percentage of exiters in a month who have returned to the rolls and are on WorkFirst twelve months later. After having hit a low of about 15 percent for those who exited in mid-1998, the measure rose to 18-19 percent for those exiting later that year and has remained at that level since. This measure indicates that WorkFirst has become less effective in maintaining families' economic independence.

Figure 6
Washington State's Workfirst Caseload



Focusing on Offices

The breakdown in the client flow to the job search workshop is one problem in the implementation of the program. The performance measures also highlighted the program's lack of success in keeping former participants at work and off assistance.

While some recycling of families onto assistance was anticipated,[11] the extent of the recycling in WorkFirst was not. A recent review of entrants onto the rolls found that only about 30 percent had never before received assistance and another 25 percent had not received assistance within the past year. The remainder, just under half of the entrants, had been on assistance some time within the past twelve months. This means a program designed largely for new entrants has been dealing with a larger than anticipated number of returners.

Two management implications follow from this. First, there needs to be greater emphasis on moving WorkFirst participants through the program, off the program and then in supporting these former participants in the critical post-employment period. Steps in this direction, the Sub-3 Work Plan and the Job Success Coach Strategy, are described below. The second implication is that services specifically designed for returners are needed. By way of example, the 30-hour first week of the job search workshop is of limited if of any value for a person who completed that workshop during a recent stay on assistance. The job search workshop and other program elements need to be better targeted on this population of returners. The refocusing and redesign is in process.

WorkFirst's 'Sub-3' is the group of agency leads responsible for implementing the program in the offices and regions. This group was assigned the responsibility of devising the set of measures and activities that will better support families and realize the program's aim of moving participants to employment. This group devised several measures of offices' performance to promote rapid re-employment. Two of the most important measures describe an office's effectiveness in moving its caseload from application to job search within 30 days and in moving the caseload to employment within 90 days. Offices than cannot meet the first of those goals and that have been unsuccessful in securing or maintaining a reduced caseload will receive high-level attention and support in achieving program goals. The Sub-3 group in addition is moving program resources to focus on the 2500 participants who are working full-time and still on assistance and the 8500 who are working part-time and not making sufficient progress in earnings to move from assistance in any reasonable time.

Focusing on Post-Employment – The Job Success Coach Initiative

The Job Success Coach Initiative (JSCI) is the newest program element designed to better assist participants exit the program to employment and remain off. This program targets intensive services by trained coaches on recently employed participants who will likely have difficulty in moving off and remaining off TANF. The Job Success Coach Initiative was implemented in July 2000 to increase participants' success and job retention, decrease the likelihood they'll return to WorkFirst and ultimately help them progress to higher wages and long-term self-sufficiency. As of February 2001, more than 1,500 employed WorkFirst participants have been assisted by coaches.

Funds in support of this program were made available with the termination of the Re-employ Washington Workers program. Flexibility in the use of WorkFirst funds enabled program leadership to move funds in this more promising direction.

The concept of the JSCI represents an amalgam of two sources. One is the imaginative work of Steve Wandner of USDOL and Chris O'Leary and Randy Eberts of Upjohn Institute. The other is the case management model of vocational rehabilitation updated with some aspects of the corporate success coach approach.

Coaches guide WorkFirst job seekers on their journey toward job success and financial independence. They help WorkFirst participants create personal plans for achieving their work goals, then support and encourage them as they develop their careers. Participants learn how much they are likely to earn based on their work history and education, and what they could earn with additional skills.

The Job Coach is introduced to the participant at the Workshop, and does not have further contact the participant until she becomes employed for at least 20 hours per week, the WorkFirst minimum standard for employment. There are two types of Job Coaches. Some Job Coaches are employees of the Washington State Employment Security Department, while others are private contractors. Upon the participant's gaining employment, the Job Coach offers a variety of services intended to promote career advancement. . Coaches are able to:

- Connect participants to community and technical colleges to explore training options.
- Authorize emergency services such as car repairs to ensure participants can get to work.
- Help with childcare, employer relations and time management.
- Intervene with employers if necessary to resolve communication or performance issues.

The Job Coach begins uses the Earning Forecaster at the beginning of working with a participant. The Earnings Forecaster, an occupations and earnings tool developed by The Washington State Employment Security Department, builds upon findings from Washington State welfare studies conducted during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Family Income Study (1987-1992) was a large longitudinal study of Washington welfare recipients. The study found that welfare recipients earnings and probabilities of employment are best predicted by work experience over the past two years and by educational level. When a Job Coach s client enters her work experience and educational level, the Forecaster displays a list of possible occupations for that participant, given her work experience, education, and the availability of positions in the local labor market.[12]

There will be an evaluation of the Job Success Coach Initiative, and will include two complementary studies. The *process analysis* tracks the design, implementation and management of the program, paying particular attention to the recruitment and training of the Coaches and their subsequent interaction with the participants. This analysis will give the contractor an understanding of the nature of the program and its delivery system, thus enabling a more accurate measurement of the program services delivered by the Coach and the Coach/Participant relationship. In short, the process analysis is a descriptive model of the program in all its parts. The statistical analysis of the program's net impact is fundamentally

based on the process model. This process analysis will also certify any shortcomings in the implementation of the program that requires attention.

The second analysis, the *net impact analysis,* will measure the net program effect of the Coach/Participant relationship, including the structure of services and treatments provided to the Participant, on:

- Job retention;
- The change in long-term earnings due to
  - An increase in the hourly wage rate, and
  - An increase in hours worked per week
- Any reduction in residual dependence on welfare after initially acquiring at least a 20-hour a week job.
- Education/housing

The RFP for the evaluation has been issued and potential bidders' proposals are being evaluated. The evaluation study is planned for three years, beginning in July 2001.

Improving Washington's WorkFirst Program

The states' TANF programs are complex and our experience indicates the complexity can easily increase over time. The flexibility afforded the states in this work-oriented program enables the program designs to better match participants and services. The plausible argument for a better match is that any reasonable set of services enabling a participant to permanently exit assistance is likely to be cost effective. There are many good ideas about what works well with certain types of individuals.[13] Some of these are built upon pilot efforts and others upon experiences in the states.

Too many components within a program, however, and the risk is the whole will work less well than the sum of the parts. That is, what works best for any individual may not work at all well for a program. It is no small management challenge to maintain a subtly designed program. The message that defines the program's purpose for staff and contractors can get diluted. What is the program about, staff will ask. They will wonder if their purpose is to link participants to employment, or to contractors' services or to which contractor's services. Some of this is inevitable in a program with multiple goals for former participants, including gaining employment, employment retention, wage progression and, we emphasize, a better life. While it is difficult to administer and deliver a program with these varied goals, it becomes even more difficult if program elements are allowed to proliferate.

Our task is to identify and deliver the limited set of services most effective for WorkFirst participants and former participants. This is what performance management is about and it is the challenge motivating our measurement and research efforts. Administrative data and program research have led us to conclude that sustained progress for WorkFirst participants and for the program itself hinge on post-employment services and supports. We will shortly have in place the required pieces to inform us if this decision was correct and if the centerpieces of our strategy will have performed as we anticipate.

Endnotes

[1] As an example of the use of the performance data and exit studies by program critics, see Mark McDermott, Assessing Washington State s WorkFirst Welfare Reform: A Failure in Promoting Upward Mobility and Steady Employment, Statewide Poverty Action Network, Seattle WA: January 23, 2001. This report can be found at http://www.fremontpublic.org/SPAN/Reports/assessingworkfirst.pdf

[2] The exit studies can be found at http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/about/ExitIndex.htm The longitudinal study description can be found at http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/about/StudyDescript.htm

[3] These local performance measures can be found at http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/statestaff/PerformanceMeasures.htm

[4] Jane Field, Washington State s WorkFirst Longitudinal Study , Presented to the Pacific Northwest Regional Economic Conference, Victoria, BC, May 2001.

[5] Marieka Klawitter, Employment, A Report from the WorkFirst Longitudinal Study. Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle: January 24, 2001. http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/about/STudyEmployment.pdf.

[6] Marieka Klawitter, Employment, A Report from the WorkFirst Longitudinal Study. Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle: January 24, 2001. http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/about/STudyEmployment.pdf.

[7] Marieka Klawitter, The TANF Report , The WorkFirst Study, http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/about/StudyTANF.pdf.

[8] Marieka Klawitter, Employment, A Report from the WorkFirst Longitudinal Study. Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle: January 24, 2001. http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/about/STudyEmployment.pdf

[9] Russell Lidman, The Link Between Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Unemployment Insurance: What We Know in Washington State, in Evelyn Ganzglass and Karen Glass (eds.), Rethinking Income Support for the Working Poor, National Governors Association, 1999.

[10] The emphasis on rapid re-employment was influenced by the persuasive work of Larry Good. See his Never Leaving the Workforce: Creating a New Employment Model, in Rethinking Income Support for the Working Poor, ibid.

[11] The longitudinal study of an earlier Washington welfare reform found that in a four year period, 1988-92, about 36 percent of the caseload exited and remained off and 29 percent exited and returned to assistance for some period. See Russell Lidman, The Family Income Study and Washington s Welfare Population: A Comprehensive Review, Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Olympia WA: 1995, p. 8. http://www.wa.gov/wsipp/hlthwelfare/pdf/fisreview.pdf

[12] The Front-line Decision Support System for the one-stop system is an automated system that will estimate a job-seekers placement wage, project a target wage and would be targeted for any additional services. See Stephen Wandner, Targeting Employment Services Under the Workforce Investment Act, Presented at Targeting Employment Services, Upjohn Institute Conference, Kalamazoo MI, April 20 — May 1, 1999. The Washington State Employment Security Department s Earnings Forecaster is a rudimentary version of the Front-Line Decision Support System. It can be found at http://www.wilam.org/forecaster .

[13] For one particularly thoughtful and comprehensive consideration of program options, see Julie Strawn and Karin Martinson, Steady Work and Better Jobs How to Help Low-Income Parents Sustain Employment and Advance in the Workforce, MDRC: June 2000. See http://www.mdrc.org/Reports2000/SteadyWorkGuide.pdf

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